INTERACTIVE BLOG FOR ESL TEACHERS AS A RESOURCE TO IMPROVE

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS READING COMPREHENSION.

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Abstract

We now live in a world that in which technology permeates every aspect of our lives. Technology can also inspire creativity and bring new opportunities to people and especially for teachers in order to connect them to new ideas and people they otherwise might not have met. Some of the benefits of learning with technology is that many classrooms teachers use technology to have evidence of their learners motivation and engagement, and this is often a major reason for the use of learning how to use technology. There is also evidence that the use of technological tools empowers learners to transcend the traditional concept of the classroom (Drexler, 2010) and can lead to learners to take greater ownership of their learning (Terrell, 2011), especially through being actively involved together outside the classroom. Technology can be a highly engaging and interactive tool, that provides a source of real language, both written and spoken, in the classroom, and to motivated learners to produce more language.

Dedication

       I dedicate this thesis to my beloved parents, who have found a way to encourage me and give me the strengths in spite of the distance. Finally, I dedicate my thesis to myself I never doubted that I would complete this daunting project and despite all the opportunities that I had I follow my dreams.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The internet has already established its place in most lives, but its role as a learning tool is yet to be proven. The internet has made the world smaller and education has profited from it, especially English language learners. With the help of this technological tool, getting in contact with the language has become easier and quicker. Students and teachers no longer count only on books or ready-made materials; the internet became has become field of information.

During recent years, using interactive blogs has emerged as a language learning tool, and accordingly, this technique has come to constitute an important place within the context of EFL. There still remain unsolved issues as to how EFL teachers can effectively incorporate interactive blogs into their teaching activities within their existing curricula. Thus, this project reviews the current research on the use of interactive blogs for EFL teachers for vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension: What Make Reading Faster and Easier? However, before presenting a review of the studies on the effects of using interactive blogs on EFL teaching, the term blog and some related concepts as well as the theoretical framework of blogging in accordance with the constructivist approach must be described and clarified. A blog is a site or online journal published on the World Wide Web for discussion or informational purposes in a reverse chronological order (Blood, 2000; Dyrud et al., 2005; Kajder & Bull, 2004). Blogs that interactively allow their visitors to leave comments and messages (Mutum & Wang, 2010) consist of web-based journals that are easily linked and cross-linked in online communities (Goodwin-Jones, 2003) or discrete entries or posts that are created by single individuals, small groups or multiple authors.

Blogs are themed around certain topics (Kajder & Bull, 2004), and they allow bloggers to create social relations with their readers (Gaudeul & Peroni, 2010), to use unrestricted time and place (Dyrud et al., 2005), and to give personal responses to articles (Jacobs, 2003). While most blogs are textual, a blog typically combines texts, images, videos, and links to other blogs and focus on specific areas. Blogs that are used as instructional resources or for educational purposes are referred to as edublogs. Though blogs are not directly intended for educational purposes and uses, they have drawn attention from EFL educators as they constitute a tool for creating journals without requiring any experience or knowledge about computer programming (Wu, 2006), and they serve as a learning tool with the context of a language learning (de Almeida Soares, 2008).

According to Leaning (2010), internet communications, including blogs, are a constantly changing and transforming system of social practice, given the media is constantly being transformed and changed by new technologies. Interactive blogs are viewed as a media technology that will transform life and the social practices that we engage in (Leaning, 2010). blogs have been well received in education because of their multimedia features, simple web publishing, interactivity, and ability to support cooperative and autonomous learning. Teachers can read other blogs, give their comments on them, and refer to them in their own blogs. Research shows that the use of blogs plays an important role in developing interactions among students and between teachers and students in the target language. As Thorne and Payne (2005) noted, writing environments such as blogs and wikis enhance interactions and communicative practices among learners. Furthermore, as Hsu's (2009) study confirmed, the use of blogs by pre-service EFL teachers not only increases their motivation, but it also enriches the discussions and interactions.

As a result, this thesis project's main aim is to create this interactive blog, not only will help EFL teachers, and learners but also to have the opportunity to be in communication between other teachers and students who want to contribute to the enrichment of the vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Well interactive content often leads to more content opportunities as discussions and debates can provide questions or fuel for extra content. This is a great way to involve online resources and content. Also blogging positively affects the perceptions of and attitudes towards EFL learning, so teachers will feel supported. It also through interactive blogs that many teachers improve their teaching and would therefore qualify blogs as a teaching tool in education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

We now live in a world that in which technology permeates every aspect of our lives. Technology can also inspire creativity and bring new opportunities to people and especially for teachers in order to connect them to new ideas and people they otherwise might not have met. Some of the benefits of learning with technology is that many classroom teachers use technology to have evidence of their learners motivation and engagement, and this is often a major reason for the use of learning how to use technology. There is also evidence that the use of technological tools empowers learners to transcend the traditional concept of the classroom (Drexler, 2010) and can lead to learners to take greater ownership of their learning (Terrell, 2011), especially through being actively involved together outside the classroom. Technology can be a highly engaging and interactive tool, that provides a source of real language, both written and spoken, in the classroom, and to motivated learners to produce more language.

In this chapter, I will examine the benefits of learning technology and the integration in the ESL classroom and how teachers benefit from it. I then provide definitions of what is a blog and how this tool will help ESL teachers to improve their vocabulary and reading comprehension in students and what researchers mentioned how this tool can be implemented in the teaching process. In the same manner, I will discuss several studies that support the idea that the blogs can be use as technological tool for ESL classroom teachers. Finally, I will discuss the challenges that teachers may encounter when trying to integrate technology into their classrooms.

Benefits of Learning Technology

As for the use of technology in education and communication, Motteram (2009) maintained that technology enabled traditional classes to be connected to the real world, and Warschauer (2006) stated that language learning is reinforced by engaging with others, either face-to-face or via digital tools. Majhi and Maharana (2010) stated that web 2.0 tools such as weblogs, are suitable for educational lifelong learning purposes because the world has been built to a large degree on digital environments, and educational practices must foster a creative and collaborative engagement of learners with this digital environment in the learning process. Among all web tools available in web 2.0, blogs are defined as websites that are easy to create and easy to maintain (Blackstone et al., 2009).

There are some advantages for using a blog for language teaching purposes. The first one is simplicity. Simplicity is the most appealing aspect of using a blog. Users do not need to know how the blog is designed or programmed. The user-friendly design attracts users to post information or maintain it on a constant basis (Holmes, 2005). According to Tseng (2008), another advantage of a blog is discussion. It is the space to post questions or discussions before or after class, and teachers can foster class discussion and interaction if they can work online with the students simultaneously. Unfortunately, many teacher educators are equally ill equipped for these challenges and are largely unfamiliar with pedagogical strategies, planning techniques, and curriculum that foster meaningful learner engagement with forms of new media such as the uses of blogs (Pascarella, 2008; Wassell & Crouch, 2008; Coutinho, 2007; Brescia & Miller, 2006; Stiller & Philleo, 2003; Bell & Cowie, 2001; Schwab. 2000).

Technology in education has a considerable history reaching back to the 1950s; this history includes educational radio, film, and television (Saettler, 1990). According to Morgan eventually, of course, digital technology and the emergence of personal computing took hold and finally the internet and World Wide Web took over. In terms of language education, we have come a long way since the audio technologies that were once a cornerstone of language training. With the growth of the Web over the last few decades and with the constant availability of its web-based tools, guaranteed access to authentic language resources of all kinds increases daily. Never before have language students had so many opportunities to practice their language skills both inside and outside of the classroom (Morgan,2014). Furthermore, research has shown that classroom practice which includes use of technology, is grounded in sound pedagogical reasons, and includes an understanding of the necessary relationship between content and technology can promote successful blending of that technology into the learning process (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

Blogs

Blood (2002) pointed out that a blog or web log is a unique online format that has evolved from the more pedantic form of a personal online journal to the interactive form of a web utility that allows users to create multimodal forms of self-expression by manipulating, remixing, and embedding various other forms of digital media (i.e., digital video, music, or artwork), posting links (i.e., to other 36 friend's blogs, favorite websites, or other digital forums), networking digital resources, and creating online affiliations as well as discursive and rich reflections or traditionally composed logs that recount events or experiences (Blood, 2002). These personally revealing reflections have often been the driving force of producing blogs

because blogging media offer users the protection of anonymity and the control of managing who is permitted to read, post, or access their blogs. Creating meaningful forms of self-expression are endemic to belonging to online participatory culture and fuel users' intrinsic motivation to participate, connect, interact, and produce networks in which they learn from one another. These characteristics are often overlooked in the preparation of teachers in contemporary education programs around the world (Pascarella, 2008; Coutinho, 2007; Brescia & Miller, 2006).

The majority of research published on blogging has emerged in the areas of Media Literacy, Communication Studies, Information Science, Library Science, and select others. Few studies have examined the implications for teacher preparation programs; (Wassell & Crouch, 2008; Coutinho, 2007; Tan, 2006; and Stiler & Philleo, 2003). According to Tan Does scaffolded blogging promote pre-service teacher reflection? which, as the title denotes, examined the relationships between blogs, scaffolding, and pre-service teacher was exanimated. Tan's (2006). study offered various contributions to the field of teacher education and produced suggestions for curriculum and instructional reform as well as gleaned additional areas of further research that relate to the use of blogs with K-12 students and two comprehensive statistical reports published by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Rainie, 2005; Lenhart et al, 2007).

Research on the role of writing and reading relates to the use of blogs as a tool for learning. Combining writing and reading in the content classroom draws on the theories of constructivism, social learning, and motivation. Hillocks (2002) maintained that most classrooms are still very teacher-centered, offering students few choices in their own learning and few opportunities to share their learning with other students. (Young, 1997, p. 5).

Since 2003, the uses of blogs in the classroom, teacher preparation programs, and K-12 classrooms, with a range of research questions and objectives at the intersection of instructional design and practices, technological abilities of teacher and learner, and promotion of learner participant reflection. Stiller and Philleo (2003) demonstrated findings derived from the use of blogs as a helpful multicultural education tool. Though not designated as a formal course assessment, the blogs served as an outlet through which learners posted their comments and ideas regarding course materials, activities, and discussions. In 2006, Ashley Tan demonstrated in a study that he made that the use of blogs in a technology and media education course with the publication of his dissertation in which he investigated the relationships between blogs and scaffolding to determine if blogs promoted preservice teacher reflection in comparison to online discussion forums operational in online courses. Coutinho (2007) examined whether the use of blogs in a technology and media education course aided pre-service teachers to plan and design effective learning environments and experiences supported by technology; implement curriculum plans that included methods and strategies for applying technology to maximize student learning.

Also Crouch (2008) explored the benefits of using blogs in a multicultural education course, but more specifically examining the ways blogs facilitated pre-service teachers' critical engagement with topics and issues in education. Perhaps, the most significant contribution to this literature arrived more recently in Luehmann's (2008) findings, which determined that "blogging contributed to [a] teacher's development of her vision and dispositions, led to new understandings of content, pedagogy, and her students, and positively affected her practice by helping her in planning and other decision-making processes" (p. 176).

Before students develop understanding of technology and online tools, teachers must be knowledgeable and aware of practices themselves before implementing the use of New

Literacies in their classroom (Lankshear & Knobel, 2014). It is important as with any content area that the teacher must understand the tools and how they can be used.

Blogs in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Blogs have become widely used by language teachers for a few fundamental reasons. First of all, it is an extremely low-tech solution, done entirely at a click of a mouse, with absolutely no technical knowledge necessary to create, edit and update the blog. It is an important breakthrough as opposed to webpage publishing that was required. It is also the collaborative nature of blogs that is extremely conducive to promoting language interaction and involves students in the activity. There are multiple educational uses of blogs, both general ones and directed specifically to teaching and learning a foreign language, which can constitute an easy way of creating websites, to serve faculty by providing dynamic content, either personal or professional.

Integrating technology in the classroom can benefit student learning, but its value depends on how effectively teachers use technology to support instruction (Fulton et al.,2004). Technology integration also brings with it new and often different roles for teachers, since the role of the teacher shifts to a facilitator rather than a content provider (The Education Alliance, 2005). According to Becker (1994), teachers need a considerable amount of technical support to achieve technology integration. This should include the availability of instant troubleshooting support and continuous maintenance of systems. Teachers become frustrated and give up on using technology in their classrooms without this technical support system. Technology support is an integral part of integrating technology in the classroom (Becker 1994). Beattie (2000) suggested four ways in creating a technical staff to help a school to reach its technology

potential. First, technology experts must be able to focus on their roles full time (Beattie, 2000). Next, in addition to understanding the education process, an understanding of computer technology is necessary for these technology experts to have (Beattie, 2000). Third, having a realistic budget to not only be able to purchase technology, but also have the funds to maintain the equipment on a regular basis allows for students and teachers reliability and access of using the technology (Beattie, 2000). Lastly, the assurance of technology staff as essential members of the school's planning process, and not just employees that resolve basic computer issues (Beattie, 2000). The conclusions of the research project of incorporating blogs in the classroom allows teachers to utilize technology with as a tool and helps build material to help students with the vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Second Language Reading Comprehension

However, researchers over the past years have investigated early literacy development in first language (Peregoy & Boyle, 2016; Herrera & Murray, 2016). Some researchers have found that English reading and writing development processes are very similar between both English learners and English speakers (Hudelson, 1984; Urzua, 1987). In other words, when learning to read, students gradually start using their English language knowledge, print concepts, and new vocabulary to make sense of a text. Consequently, reading is a complex process for all learners, which takes a long period to develop, teachers gradually scaffold and guide students to master those skills. Second language learners use their background knowledge to develop ideas and use the reading process similarly to English speakers.

Herrera and Murray (2016) presented many writing examples from beginner and intermediate ESL learners to illustrate what these students can do according to their level. Using pictures, wordless books, journals, freewriting and pre-writing brainstorming using mind maps are some of the strategies the authors suggested fostering writing skills in those ESL levels. Engaging students in collaborative and cooperative activities in the classroom is another strategy that allows learners to develop social/emotional and communicative skills where they have to use language in real-life situations to share an opinion, discuss and solve a writing task, (Peregoy & Boyle, 2016). Working in teams gives students' self-esteem and confidence to give and receive feedback from their peers and do not feel afraid to try again (Herrrera & Murray, 2016).

In this same way, researchers have found that reading processes are similar in English speakers and English learners (Hudelson, 1981). Studentsuse their previous knowledge of symbols, sounds, and grammar to infer meaning. Peregoy and Boyle (2016) highlighted the importance of metacognition in the comprehension processes. Providing explicit instruction on metacognitive strategies helps students to understand and process information and new knowledge. Peregoy and Boyle (2013) also discussed the "new literacy" of internet reading. The use of the internet and technological apps in reading for English learners offers several scaffolds to comprehension. Students can read further information from a topic by only following a link, using pictures, videos, and music to support their learning. Some strategies used to engage beginning learners are reading stories that they may already know in their L1 language to transfer their previous knowledge and comprehend a text. In addition, the authors emphasized that students should select their books and share their understanding in groups. Teachers can use various formal and informal assessments to check continuous growth to differentiate instruction according to students' needs (Peregoy & Boyle 2016).

Teachers must spend time building digital and technological skills in the classroom, such as download apps, workspaces, login zoom meetings, and platforms to submit their work. In addition, it is crucial to involve parents, training them in the use of technological skills for them to be involved in their children's learning process and support them from home (Herrera & Murray, 2016). In addition, teachers can face the lack of technological skills and professional development in virtual education. To be successful teaching virtually, teachers need to be comfortable with the content they are teaching, the technology used to deliver instruction and develop strong online teaching skills (Archambault, 2011). A case study conducted by Archambault (2014) showed some teachers' perceptions about virtual teaching. They said it was a big struggle with the learning transition from face-to-face teaching to online learning and learning how to use the workspace to deliver instruction, all the tools and understanding apps suggested by the board of education. For many educators, using technological tools was time consuming and was more challenging than teaching face to face. However, with time and practice, teachers and students felt more comfortable working virtually and embraced the benefit of all the great tools virtual learning provides them.

Teacher researcher Shirley Pyon (2008) has used blogs in her third-grade classroom across subject areas. Her study was conducted in her culturally diverse elementary classroom, focusing on the use of blogs during reading. She conducted her study to find how blogging encourages discussions about reading. Her study yielded positive results. Also, she mentioned that her English Language Learners were able to write more freely, without worrying about their dialect or fear of pronouncing something incorrectly. Her students shared that they more confident on the computer, and felt more comfortable saying nice things (Pyon, 2008). As our

society continues to change, it is a teacher's job to prepare students as future members and contributors to society. Technology is an essential tool in our lives, and in the students' lives, especially as they continue to journey through our continuously growing technological world. Elementary teacher, Todd Wright (2008), has used technology in his classroom every day. He has shared ways he uses technology to help guide his instruction, and how it is a powerful tool to use in the classroom. As Todd Wright (2008) shared his opinion about incorporating technology in the classroom, he reminded readers that it is a teacher's job to prepare their students for the future. Incorporating technology will be a lot of work at first, but he has met technology standards, while seeing increased student engagement (Barone & Wright, 2008, p. 302).

Chapter 3: Project Design

In this chapter, I explain my rationale for creating an interactive blog with activities for teachers to use with English learners to help develop their reading comprehension and vocabulary. The purpose of the blog is intended to be an additional resource for teachers to use when planning their lessons.

One of the important factors influencing ELLs' lower achievement and poor academic performance is difficulty with reading comprehension (Chung, 2012; Jang, et al 2013). Kalmane demonstrate, comprehension is the private possession of an individual and develops through processes they go through, and associations they make, and is not observable (Kalmane, 2012). This process of comprehension is an important part of reading. Reading comprehension is a multi- faceted process and it is important for learners to develop it early as it provides access to content later in their academic lives (Carlo et al., 2004).

The goal of reading is to comprehend what is being read (Snyder, et al 2017). According to Taboada, without the ability to comprehend content in classes, learners can fail (Taboada et al., 2015). This is true for various types of text and content areas (Crosson & Lesaux, et al, 2015). For example, in social studies classes, reading comprehension involves a concentration on both vocabulary and possession of background knowledge (Brown, Swanson et al, 2017). Brown points out that, reading comprehension in social studies also involves additional skills such as awareness of complex syntax that relates knowledge in long sentences, analysis of author's point

of view, inferencing as to the sufficiency of evidence to support claims, and chronological thinking involved in historical cause and effect (Brown, Swanson et al., 2017).

Reading comprehension plays an important role in academic success and vocabulary development has been recognized as an essential aspect of the language ability necessary to support reading comprehension (Lei, et al, Wallace, 2007). Carlo points out, this is especially important to ELLs as inadequate vocabulary understanding and lower levels of grammar skills have a substantial negative impact on comprehension (Carlo et al., 2008). Actions useful in supporting vocabulary skill development among all learners include practice with frequently used words, pairing them with word definitions when necessary, and reading often (Lei et al., 2009; Nagy et al, 1985). Cisco demonstrate, when learners' reading comprehension abilities are low, problems develop. Various problems can interfere with the ability of K-12 learners to comprehend what they read. Challenges with vocabulary, spoken or text-based, constitute one of these reading comprehension problems experienced by middle level ELLs (Cisco & Padron, Howard et al., 2014). Vocabulary skills and poor reading fluency, in which reading of text is inaccurate and slow, also complicates successful reading comprehension for learners at all levels (Cirino et al., 2013; Guerin & Murphy, 2015).

Consequently, ESL teachers are struggling to find appropriate materials, activities or worksheet for students to build their comprehension and improve their vocabulary. That is why I want to create an interactive blog: Blogs are commonly used as a tool to help teachers plan or have resources to prepared their lesson daily lessons. Blogs often include short stories, with basic vocabulary list that can be introduced to students before reading the story, and basic questions to pose to students before during and after the reading. The short stories come with a question set, vocabulary activities and a writing prompt that always requires the student to provide textual

evidence in their response. This blog will be a resource to help ESL teachers as resource and they can also communicate with other teachers and share ideas to collaborate during their daily teaching.

Chapter 4: The Project

The present project is the design of an educational interactive blog to support teachers with resources to improve the reading comprehension in elementary students. Likewise, in this blog there are short stories with a basic vocabulary list that can be introduced to students before reading the story and basic questions to pose to students before, during, and after the reading. This blog will be a resource to help ESL teachers as a resource, and they can also communicate with other teachers and share ideas to collaborate during their daily teaching.

The name of the blog is teacher resource corner (Figure 4.1), and the web address is
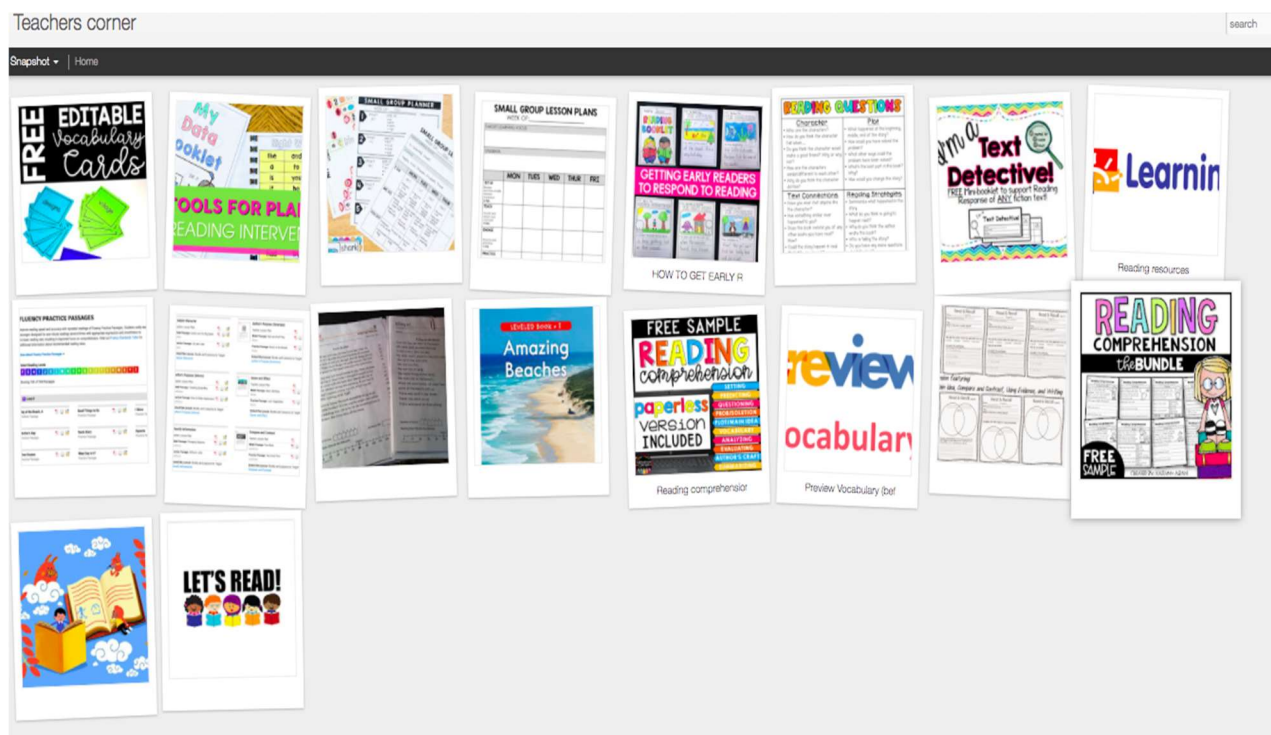
teachersresourcescorner.blogspot.com

Figure 4.1: Home Page

In the main menu, teachers will find snapshots of all of the content the blog has, from the reading questions, the small groups interventions, vocabulary before, during and after reading, and much more. Teachers also will have some external resources and a small store for those who want to have more than the resources the blog offers.

One of the first posts includes the blog **"Teacher Corner introduction," (Figure 4.2),** which is a short introduction of what teachers will have in mind and go through the reading stages and specially the vocabulary.
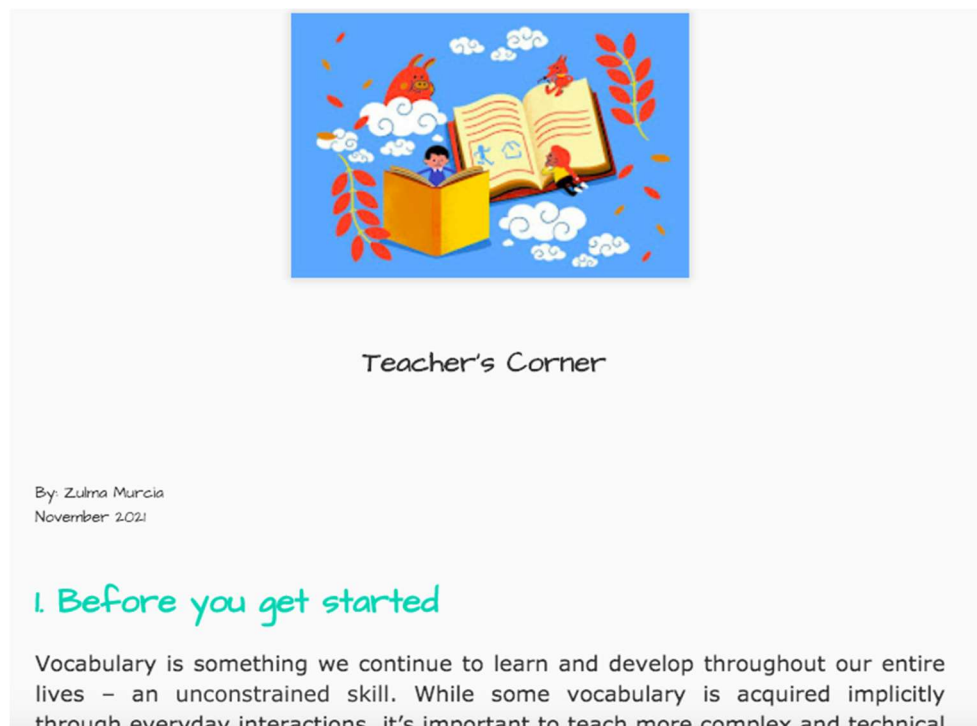

Figure 4.2: Teacher Corner Introduction

In the next post teachers will find a "**Preview" (Figure 4.3)** of the activities they can practice before doing the reading. Teachers are exposed to some of the structure to pre-teach vocabulary from the reading they have chosen, including some material they can download for free and practice in the classroom.
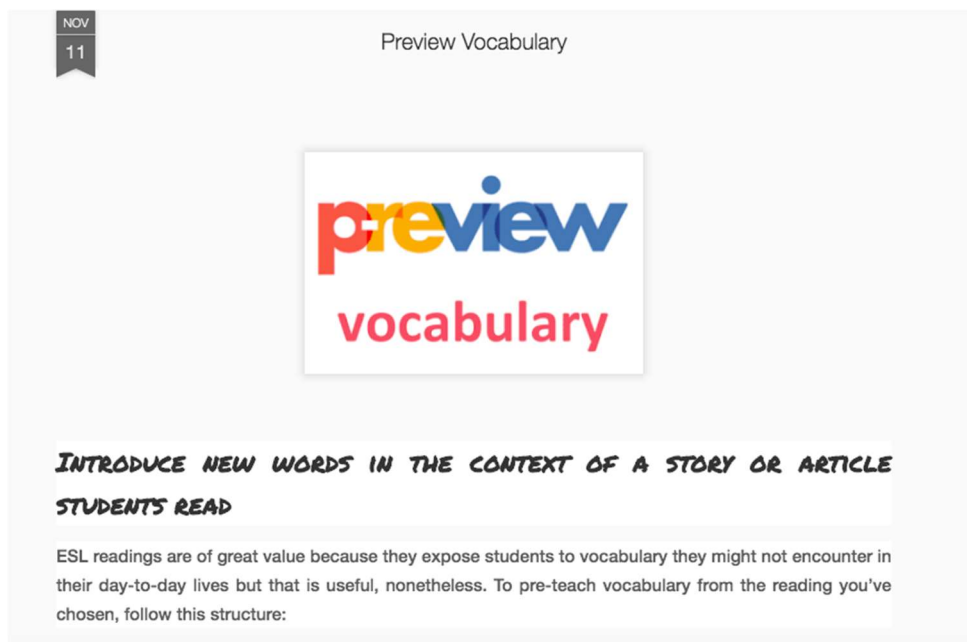

Figure 4.3: Preview

The next post teachers will find "**Reading Interventions" (Figure 4.4)** where teachers can read and put together a comprehensive small group. It comes with some activities and templates the teacher can use in the lesson planning to form the interventions or small groups and work on the reading comprehension more individually and personalized.
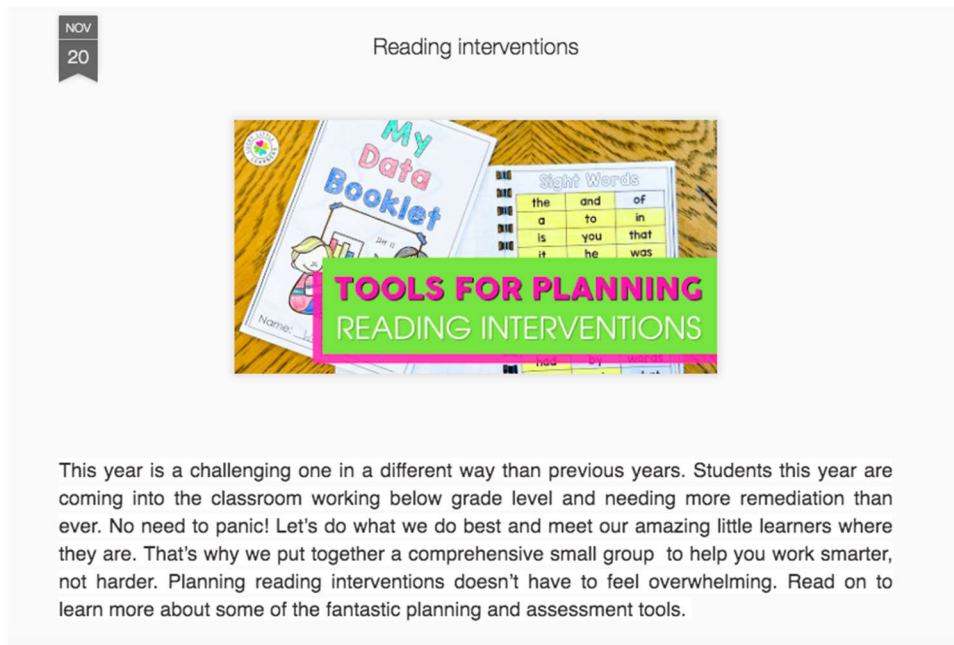
Figure 4.5: Reading Interventions

The next post teachers will find "**Reading Resource**" (**Figure 4.6**) where the teachers will be able to link to a website where they can find leveled books, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as phonics, sight words, and reading comprehension passages and activities.
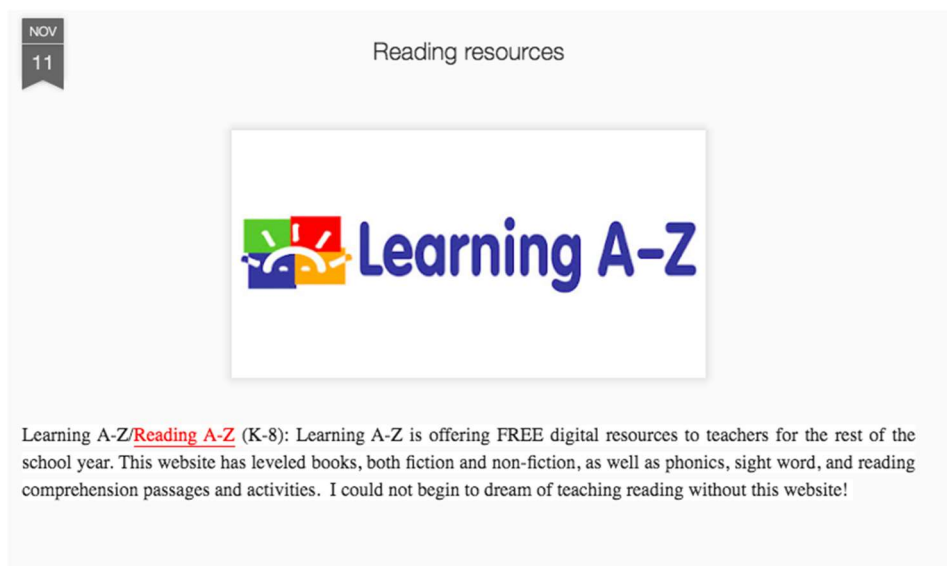

Figure 4.6: Reading Resource

On the right sidebar of the blog, teachers will find "**My Store" (Figure 4.7)** where they can shop and have an extra material for daily planning to support reading in the stages of comprehension and vocabulary improvement.
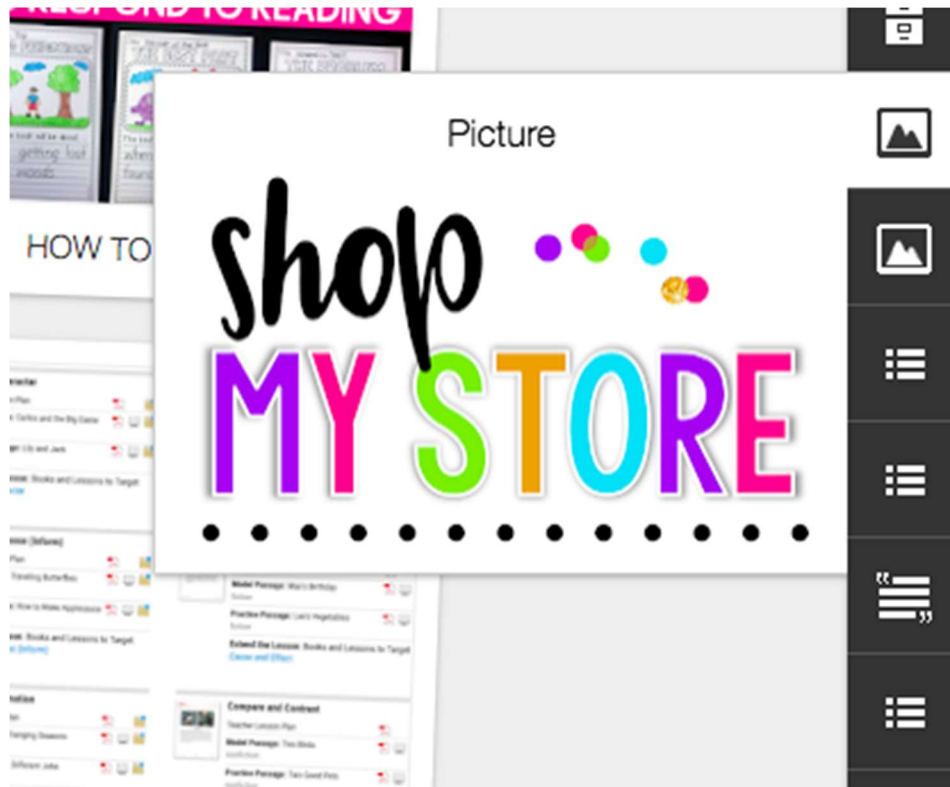

Figure 4.7: My Store

This project will continue developing in terms of adding more material and resources so teachers can have more support for reading comprehension improvement. Also, I would like to encourage some other teachers to share some their own material or resources they have been using to the blog so we can have more tools to help future teachers who want to improve their students reading comprehension as well give me some feedback to keep working on the blog for future references.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Second language acquisition or learning is a process where an individual acquires or learn another language, this could be a third or a fourth language after a first language is established. However, a distinction is made between language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is a subconscious process. Language acquirers are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language, but rather develop a "feel" for correctness. Language learning refers to the conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them.

Language is culture. When one decides to learn a language, for example, he or she is not going to learn the linguistics patterns alone. Language learning comes with the introduction of its speaker's behavior, lifestyle, food and beliefs. Language is more than just words. It's powerful social behavior that speaks volumes about who we are, where we come from and how we relate. Language is a social and cultural identity; language loss is a loss of its speaker's identity.

In foreign language teaching where the teacher is from the culture of the target language being learn or acquired, the teacher must also be ready to learn the culture of the students since he/she(teacher) would also be introduced to a different language and culture. This is what I termed "cultural exchange" in the context of second language acquisition/learning process

Being a foreign language teacher has been a beautiful process of knowledge from my students and for myself. Leaning is a non-stop process and that is why I decided to create the interactive blog; Blogs are commonly used as a tool to help teachers plan or have resources to prepared their lesson daily lessons. Blogs often include short stories, with basic vocabulary list that can be introduced to students before reading the story, and basic questions to pose to students before during and after the reading. The short stories come with a question set, vocabulary activities and a writing prompt that always requires the student to provide textual evidence in their response. Reading and writing skills are complex areas to teach beginner students due to the lack of vocabulary and background context, both of which need to be led by gradually scaffolding and guiding students to master those skills. That is why this blog will be a resource to help ESL teachers as resource and they can also communicate with other teachers and share ideas to collaborate during their daily teaching.

It has been such a wonderful experience for my teaching career and personal life doing this master degree, I will be thankful to all my teachers for the support they gave me during the entire two years. I am so proud to be an effective ESL teacher, but soon I realize that I can help my students more than just learning; I can also be helpful in improving their attitude towards study, career and even life. With the blog I created in this project, I hope ESL teachers take the opportunity to check them out and try them in their classes, becoming technology users and allowing their students to learn in a student-centered environment. It is essential to highlight that this educational app is not complex to use; teachers who are not technology experts can easily create their lessons, link videos, pictures, and books. These activities can also be modified according to the context and students' needs and where they will be used.

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